



## **News Release**

For Immediate Release  
Wednesday, December 10, 2003  
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### **Ask for a Mask When Visiting Health Care Buildings UDOH Launches New Respiratory Illness Control Effort**

**(Salt Lake City, UT)** - The Utah Department of Health (UDOH), in partnership with health organizations, hospitals and local health departments, is launching the "Ask for a Mask" public awareness campaign in an effort to help control the spread of respiratory illness, such as influenza, in health care settings. With limited influenza vaccine supplies and increased levels of influenza-like illness circulating in Utah, it is important that the public understand how to protect themselves and those around them from infectious diseases.

Cough, cold and flu season is here and beginning this week, visitors to Utah's health care offices and buildings will be asked to do their part to keep respiratory illnesses from spreading when visiting health care facilities. The "Ask for a Mask" message encourages those visiting health care buildings to request a mask if they have a fever with cough or rash and to wear it for the duration of their visit. In the coming weeks and for the remainder of the cough, cold and flu season, signs and bookmarks will be posted and distributed widely in hospital and doctor's waiting rooms where the sick often expose others to their germs.

The signs and bookmarks also reinforce the basics of "respiratory etiquette" which includes covering your mouth and nose every time you sneeze or cough, placing used tissues into the trash, washing hands well and often with soap and water and/or using an alcohol hand sanitizer. Of course, the first line of defense when you're sick is to stay home and away from social situations such as church, shopping, holiday gatherings, school or work. Also, consider a greeting other than a handshake to help keep germs from infecting others.

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“Simple surgical masks are an effective, low-tech way to keep many respiratory illnesses from spreading in healthcare settings,” said Dr. Robert Rolfs, State Epidemiologist, UDOH. “Health care professionals are used to wearing masks, but this will be something new for patients or visitors to health care facilities. I urge Utahns to take these basic infection control measures to heart and do their part to help reduce the spread of respiratory illnesses.”

Masks have been shown to be an effective way to limit the spread of respiratory diseases. Respiratory diseases can be spread to others from tiny droplets that exit the nose or mouth of an infected person when they cough, sneeze or talk. The common cold, flu, whooping cough, chicken pox, measles, rubella and SARS are all examples of diseases that can be spread by droplets in the air. Fever with a cough or rash are common symptoms of these diseases.

“While it may seem unusual at first and may take some getting used to, using masks will put us in a much better position to help slow the spread of infectious diseases,” said Joseph M. Krella, President, Utah Hospital and Health Systems Association. “We encourage all visitors to hospitals and healthcare facilities to ask for a mask if they are experiencing cold and flu symptoms.”

The UDOH is pleased that so many partners have stepped forward to take part in the “Ask for a Mask” public awareness message. Facilities belonging to IASIS Health Care, Intermountain Health Care, MountainStar Health Care, the University of Utah Medical Center, VA Salt Lake City Health Care System and Nighttime Urgent Care Clinics will all be posting the helpful message and be providing masks. All 12 local health departments in Utah are also participating.

To view the poster and bookmark, or for more information on infection control, visit the Utah Department of Health Web site at: [www.health.utah.gov](http://www.health.utah.gov). Note: PDF copies of the Ask for a Mask poster and bookmark have been sent along with this news release and are also available at [http://www.health.utah.gov/html/press\\_releases.html](http://www.health.utah.gov/html/press_releases.html)